Free Will and Divine Knowledge in Medieval Jewish Philosophy: Maimonides, Gersonides and R. Shlomo Ben Adrat (Rashba)

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FREE WILL AND DIVINE KNOWLEDGE IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY: MAIMONIDES, GERSONIDES, and R. SOLOMON BEN ADERET (RASHBA)

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Abstract. This article discusses human free will from the perspective of three Jewish thinkers of the Middle-ages: Maimonides, Gersonides and Solomon Ben Adret. We commence with understanding the parameters of free will in Jewish thought and then discuss the theological problem of all religionists in the middle –ages, namely, God's prescience and the possibility of human free will. We discuss as well the idea of Divine knowledge of the present and the future from the perspective of the rationalist and kabbalist.

Keywords: free will; determinism; morality; knowledge; logic and paradoxes.

The idea of human free will and choice stands as the basis of human morality and ethical decision making. The idea that human beings are free agents to choose their paths in life puts the responsibility for the outcomes of one's actions on one's own shoulders. Therefore the importance of this notion from an ethical point of view cannot be exaggerated.[1] Jean-Paul Sartre made this point by saying: "We are always ready to take refuge in a belief in determinism if this freedom weighs upon us or if we need an excuse" (Sartre 1956, 78-79). Despite the importance of free will as a basis of the moral life, this notion has been challenged time and again. In modern times scientists challenge this notion from the point of view of the fixed laws of biology, however,

[1] Psychologists Kathleen D. Vohs and Jonathan W. Schooler demonstrated that convincing people that free choice is an illusion leads to more cheating (Vohs & Schooler 2008).

in the Middle-Ages, the challenge came from theologians. The argument was that if we are to assume that God is all-knowing and knows the future as well as the past and present, how could there be human free will? After all, if God knows in advance that Mr. Smith will be righteous then can Mr. Smith really have the choice not to be righteous? Conversely, if we are to say that Mr. Smith still has a choice whether to be righteous or not, this would mean that God did not know this idea absolutely. However, the assumption is that God has absolute knowledge of the future. After all, didn't he share this knowledge periodically with the prophets? Therefore it is illogical to assume human free will. This argument was so central to religious thought in the Middle Ages that it brought early Islam (the Kalam) and the Church fathers (such as St. Anselm)[2] to argue that human free will is nothing but a delusion. The Jewish stance found in the 2nd century work, Ethics of the Fathers, was that there is human free-will despite Divine foreknowledge.[3] We will discuss this idea a bit later. In modern times science has returned us to the same dilemma. When Newton demonstrated that the world works according to universal mechanical laws, again the question was asked: if everything works by blind laws, why should human beings be any different? Isn't mankind part of nature as well? It is said that when Newton discovered that the planets revolve due to the universal law of gravitation and inertia he was perplexed. After all, what then was God's task in all this? But when he discovered that his theory did not fully explain the revolving of the planets around the sun (since he was unaware of the existence of three planets: Pluto, Neptune and Uranus) he died a happy man as he found an ongoing task for the Creator of the universe.[4]

The Judeo-Christian answer to this problem was that Man is unique since he has an intellectual soul which accords him free will. This makes Man the exception to the rule. In modern times as well, the question arose again: if biology and psychology can explain behavior based on parts of the brain, who is to say that Man's free will is not just

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2 See for example the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: https://www.iep.utm.edu/freewim/#SH2b, last accessed on May 30, 2018

3 *Ethics of the fathers* 3:15 in the name of Rabbi Akiba.

4 For more on Newton's metaphysics see Manuel 1974 and Herrmann, 1976.

an illusion and that our decisions are merely programmed by the same super computer that controlled our existence in the evolution of life? This reductionist position sees the human self as the sum total of the synapses of the brain.

It is hard to offer proofs for or against free will. In fact, it might be easier to argue against free-will than for it. Don't people tend to mimic others? Don't children follow their peers' and their parents' ideas and dreams? Couldn't it be that I wanted to be a doctor since my father was? Why do socio-economic conditions determine the level of crime in a community? In favor of free will we can argue that if there is no free will, then why do we punish criminals? After all, they had no choice. In fact, what exactly would be the whole point of the judicial system without free will? And who would ever believe in rehabilitation without free will? What about education? What is the point of trying to change character traits if there is no free will? The best argument for free will is from its negation. If there is no free will, why did I have to get up this morning and go to work? I will get the salary anyway if that is how my life was determined. The same goes for schooling or any goal in life. Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410) offered the following intuitive argument: "Often we will one thing at one time but do not will it at another time. The capacity to choose is testimony to the existence of contingency, for if there were genuine contingency we would not be able to will anything at all" (Feldman 1884, 18). The complexity of the arguments shows how real the issue is. In order to delve deeper into this issue we can state that there are at least four possible positions concerning human free will.

A) Total Free will
B) Total Determinism
C) Mostly Free Will
D) Mostly Determinism

Over the centuries there were groups of people who held each one of these opinions. We mentioned before the Kalam and the early Christian theologians who felt that free will would endanger the idea of Divine foreknowledge. Many of the early astrologers felt that life was controlled by the constellations. In the realm of mostly determinism we

might place the Buddhist perspective with its doctrine of the karma, which believes that what we do in this world cannot change our position here but only in the next incarnation. This is a sort of mostly determinism stand. Within Judaism, the only position which cannot be considered legitimate is total determinism. The reasons for this are obvious: for one, Judaism is filled with commandments, and what would be the point of the commandments if there were no human free will? Second, the bible actually mentions this idea clearly and by inference. "Behold I set before you today life and good, death and evil… and you shall choose life" (Deut. 15; 19) "Who would give that their hearts would fear me all the days" (Deut. 5; 26). Also the rebuke of the prophets and the idea of Divine reward and punishment – all these point towards free will. Therefore there must be some idea of human free will. However, positions differ as to how much free will we have as human beings. The Jewish astrologers, such as Abraham Bar-Hiyyah,[5] Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167), and Gersonides (Levi Ben Gershom 1288-1344), had the tendency to limit free will by claiming that the circumstances of life are decided by the constellations even if each individual can choose within these set circumstances (Sadik 2017, 4). For instance, if according to the stars Simon will fall off the bridge on Tuesday, if Simon is righteous, he will fall off the bridge but at that moment a banana boat will pass under and he will be saved. Alternatively, Simon might decide to stay at home that day. The idea behind this unusual interface between astrology and human choice is that according to Gersonides astral determinism does not apply to particulars as such but only as astral 'classes' in general. So even if one is a member of a certain astral class, whose fate is determined by the stars, one may exercise choice and change his class affiliation by severing the ties and fate with the old one and joining a new class with a new fate (Klein-Braslavy 2015, 196-235). In other words, a person can escape their astrological fate not by escaping the system but by making an intellectual choice to be other than what they were destined to be and thus putting themselves into a new astral class. This type of thinking can draw support from Talmudic

[5] For a discussion of the complicated position of Abraham Bar Hiyya see Sadik 2018, 77-89.

sources as well.[6] The Hassidic thinkers can also be found in this category of mostly determinism. Contrary to the Jewish astrologers, they taught that it is God, rather than the constellations, who controls the circumstances of our lives. Even if I go to buy a house, God might test me to see if I buy the house near the school which is good for my children, and which is near the synagogue and has good neighbors, etc. In the category of mostly free will we find many of the Jewish rationalists, such as Saadiah Gaon (Saadiah Ben Joseph Al-Fayyumi, 882-942), who believed strongly in free will but admitted that at times there are things that are beyond our free will: for instance, the Talmud relates that it is God who brings people together in wedlock, and that what will earned during the course of the year is decreed on Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). In the category of total free will, we can find Maimonides (Moses Ben Maimon 1135 -1204). As we shall soon see, Maimonides takes a radically absolutist stand on human free will, since he feels that it is an essential element of the Jewish faith:

> Permission is given to all men: whether they want to incline towards a good path and be righteous, the choice is theirs; and whether they want to incline to an evil path and be wicked; the choice is theirs. This is what the Torah says: "Therefore has Man become as one of us to know good and evil (Gen. 3;22), meaning; therefore has this genus called Man become the sole being in the world in this aspect, that he by himself, in his mind and thought knows good from evil and does whatever he pleases and nothing can stop him from doing good or evil; therefore [we are worried] "lest he extend his hand to eat from the Tree of Life and live forever. (Maimonides, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Teshuvah, 5; 1).

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[6] *The Babylonian Talmud* (Shabbat 156B) relates a story of how Rabbi Akiba's daughter was told by an astrologer that she would die by the bite of a serpent on her wedding day. The Talmud relates that due to an act of charity which she did, she was saved by inadvertently killing the snake. This would imply that the snake was there, as the astrologer had said, but her act of charity had saved her from a possible tragic outcome.

In his discussion of the laws of penitence, Maimonides stresses that mankind has total free will. Without this free will there would be no possibility of accountability for wrong human action. Therefore if one has done wrong he must mend his ways between Man and Man and between Man and God.

> Do not think that which the ignorant of the nations or the unlearned of Israel say; that it is by Divine decree that a Man be righteous or wicked. This is untrue. Anyone can be as righteous as Moses[7] our teacher or as wicked as Jeroboam, or studious or frivolous[8] or compassionate or cruel or stingy or generous as well as any other character trait. Neither is there someone who forces him or decrees that he do this or that – only he by himself and by his own mind inclines to any way he sees fit. This is as Jeremiah said: From above does not emerge the evils or good (Lamentations 3:38). This being so, it is the sinner who has brought damage upon himself and therefore he should lament his sins and whatever evil he has done to himself. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Teshuva, 5; 2).

The idea of human free will is the basis of the Divine reward and punishment as well as the idea of self improvement and *teshuvah* (penitence). Without this free choice we are but puppets in a cosmic theater. Since Man is judged by his or her actions, and ethical action is the basis upon which human beings are judged, the idea of free will is the most basic concept in the Torah.

> This idea [of human free will] is a great principle and is the pillar of the Torah and the commandments, as it says: Behold I have given to you this day life and good, death and evil (Deut. 30:15) and it says: Behold I have set before you today the blessing and the curse (Ibid, 11:26), meaning, the choice is in your hands, and all a

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7 As righteous as Moses but not a prophet on the level of Moses. See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Knowledge, Yesodei Hatorah, 7; 6.

8 Translated according to the understanding of the Hagahot Maimoniot.

> man wants to do in human action, he can, whether good or evil. Therefore does it say: May it so be that their hearts should revere me all the days (Deut. 5:26) meaning, that the creator neither forces people nor decrees that they do good or evil but it is all in their hands. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Teshuva, 5; 3)

The terms used by Maimonides in this paragraph are unusual. Human free will is the pillar of the Torah and its commandments. It is interesting to note that Maimonides wrote that there are thirteen principles of Jewish belief[9] but did not include free will as one of them. This would mean that free will is the pillar upon which all other principles rest. Without it there is no Torah and commandments and no room for human moral decision-making. Maimonides' belief in the centrality of human free will is so strong that he is not willing to limit it even in the light of rabbinic sources which seem to imply otherwise. We mentioned before that the Jewish astrologers limited human free will to decisions taken within the given circumstances. For Maimonides there cannot be any limitations of free will between birth and death. Therefore he goes to great lengths to reinterpret any rabbinic or Geonic source which might seem to imply otherwise.[10] In his letter to Obadiah the Proselyte we see evidence of this relentless approach concerning human free will.

Obadiah asked Maimonides how one can reconcile his position of total human free-will with rabbinic sources that seem to limit human free will. The first source Obadiah brings is from the Talmud in Brakhot which says: "All is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven" (Brakhot 33b). This of course seems to imply that human free will is limited to just a few areas and the rest is in God's hands. Maimonides is at his intellectual best here and with astonishing exegetical skills interprets the statement to harmonize totally with his position:

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[9] Commentary to the mishnah, introduction to Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter Helek. For more on Maimonides' thirteen principles see Shapiro 2004.

[10] I have mentioned above that no traditional Jewish scholar would ever say: The Rabbis (Hazal) of the Talmud said this but I say otherwise, since Hazal are the pillars of our tradition and through them do we know of the early sources.

> That which you have said that all human action is not predetermined by the creator, may He be elevated, is the flawless truth. Therefore one receives reward if he has gone in the path of goodness and is punished if he chose the path of evil; and all human action is included [in the term] 'fear of heaven.' For all of human activity brings one to a *mitzvah* or to a transgression. [Therefore] what the sages of blessed memory said: "all is in the hands of heaven," [refers to] the laws of nature and all the derivatives therein like trees, animals, souls [*nefashot*], upper intellects, the planets, angels; these are all in the hands of heaven. (Maimonides 1934, 209-310)

Maimonides claims that the rabbis in the Talmud were not discussing the human arena alone. In the cosmos as a whole, many things are devoid of free will, including the laws of nature, plants, animals, stars and even the angels and higher intellects (a neo-Aristotelian concept) but mankind is totally free in its ability to choose. The reason this is referred to as "the fear of heaven" is since all of human action can be seen as relating to moral choices, whether directly or indirectly. For instance, if we buy a house, did we buy in a good neighborhood where our kids will be influenced for the good? Is it near a school and a house of prayer? Did we pick the rich area just to impress our friends? Did we do the business transaction honestly? Since human action can be seen in such a way, it is right to call human action the realm of "the fear of heaven." Maimonides, after answering the query, goes on to say something that gives us insight into his way of understanding the issue.

> Anyone who puts aside these ideas which we explained, which are based on eternal foundations, and goes off to look in the *aggadah*, the *midrash* or the sayings of one of the *Geonim* of blessed memory, to find a word to contradict our ideas which are based on reason and knowledge, is basically committing [spiritual] suicide and it is [bad] enough [the damage] which he has already done to his soul (Maimonides 1934, 209-310).

What makes Maimonides so convinced of the truth of human free choice? It is true that there are verses in scripture which speak of human free will, but its importance we know mostly due to rational inference. It is illogical that the Torah demand human action through specific commandments and through specific prohibitions as well as talk of reward and punishment if there is no human free will. This is an example of human logic deducing an idea from scripture and the notion being just as important as revelation itself. This in a nutshell is how Maimonides sees human reason. It is God-given, just like scripture. After all, didn't God create human beings "in his own image" and instill within them the faculty of reason, the Divine aspect within us? Therefore, if human reason infers a notion from the Divine-based scripture through logical deduction which is beyond doubt, then that notion becomes part of the intent of scripture. The notion of human free will is so obviously important that Maimonides says that there is no point in looking for rabbinic statements which might contradict it. If such statements exist, they would have to be reinterpreted.

The second Talmudic source brought by Obadiah the proselyte to challenge the notion of total free will concerns the question of human business transactions and marriage. The Talmud says: "Every day a heavenly voice (*Bat Kol*) announces: the daughter of so and so will wed the son of so and so and the field of so and so will be acquired by so and so." (Moed Katan 18b) This of course implies that human monetary transactions as well as choosing a mate are predestined by heaven. Doesn't this assume that there are limitations to human free will? Maimonides answers: "That which your Rabbi said to you [that a heavenly voice announces daily] 'the daughter of so and so to so and so and the money of so and so to so and so,' if this is a general rule and [we are to understand these] words by their simple meaning, why does the Torah say 'lest he die in battle and another man wed her' or '[lest] another man reap [his vineyard]'?" (Deut. 20 ,5)

Maimonides offers quite a clever answer. The Torah in Deuteronomy says that there are three people who are exempt from army duty in a

non-obligatory war (*milhemet reshut*).[11] The three are, "the man who has built a house and has not entered it yet, he shall return to his house lest he die in battle and another man enter it… the man who has planted a vineyard and has not yet reaped [its produce]… the man who has betrothed a wife and has not as yet wed her, he shall return to his house lest he die in battle and another man wed her." (Deut. 20:5-7). In short, what Maimonides is saying is that if we are to assume that one's spouse is predestined by God, then why does the Torah say "lest he die in battle and another man marry her"? What does it matter? If they are destined to be together, then he will surely return from battle, and if they are not destined to be together then it shouldn't matter if another man weds her. Therefore, we can conclude that according to the bible, marriage is not predestined by heaven:

> Is there someone in the world who would doubt this [that marriage is not predestined] after it is written in the Torah? Therefore, this is how one who understands and is ready to take the truth in hand [should act]; that he put the Torah based idea as his main principle… and if he finds a verse in the prophets or in the words of the sages of blessed memory, that contradicts this… he should try to understand the words of the prophet or of the sage. If they can harmonize with the words of the Torah – fine. If not, he should say: these words of the prophet or of the sage, I do not understand. They must be metaphorical. (Maimonides 1934, note X)

Maimonides creates a rule of thumb. If the Torah brings an idea which seems to contradict the prophets or the sages, one must follow the principle of the Torah and reinterpret the idea of the sages. This sounds like a sound proposition. The problem with this rule is that Maimonides himself does not seem to follow it. Many times he reinterprets the Torah to avoid conflict with a logical dictate.[12] This then would mean that for

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[11] For Maimonides an obligatory war is either a war to gain the land of Israel or a war of defense. A non-obligatory war would be an economically or politically motivated war.

[12] He does so, for instance, when the Bible talks of God in corporeal terms. Maimonides even goes as far as to claim that in theory, the first verse in Genesis

Maimonides, both the torah and reason are the principles upon which Divine will is understood. This is quite an insight into his thinking. In the end, though, no traditional Jewish philosopher can say that the sages (*Hazal*) say A, but he says B. For in the end of the day, without the words of the sages of the oral tradition we would be in the dark about most of Judaism. Therefore Maimonides does not stop here but attempts to reinterpret the Talmudic statement.

> That which the sages said: 'the daughter of so and so to so and so' [refers] to reward and punishment. If this man or this woman did a good deed that deserves reward, they receive a good mate from the Holy One Blessed Be He. If they deserve punishment, they receive a mate who battles and quarrels with them… but this is not a general principle. (Maimonides 1934, note X)

Maimonides claims that in general, marriage is not predestined by God, however, in certain cases there is Divine intervention in the way of reward or punishment.

This is quite a surprising conclusion to anyone who might have been present at a traditional Jewish wedding today. The most popular wedding pastime is always trying to show how the marriage was predestined in heaven. Actually, the Talmud itself states that from the Torah, the prophets, and the later writings it can be proven that marriages are predestined by heaven. The Talmud (Moed Katan 18b.) itself raises the question from Devarim 20 and answers differently than Maimonides. We can see, therefore, how important the principle of human free will is for Maimonides. It is so important that even if it appears that the sages held the opinion that free will has limitations, we must reinterpret.

Maimonides is quite unique among Jewish philosophers in his unbending position on total human free choice. This position however has a major educational implication. Maimonides' staunch belief in the

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stating that God created the heavens and the earth, could have been interpreted metaphorically if necessary but that creationism is too important a concept to relinquish. *Guide* II, 25.

centrality of human free will creates a sense of moral responsibility. If I am the one choosing, then I must bear the responsibility of my actions. This is a healthy way to relate to moral choices in life. Maimonides goes on to claim that there is no Jewish thinker who would disagree with this position:

> The theory of Man's perfectly free will is one of the fundamental principles of the law of our teacher Moses, and of those who follow the law. According to this principle Man does what is in his power to do, by his nature, his choice and his will; and his action is not due to any faculty created for the purpose… Against this principle we hear, thank God, no opposition from our nation. (Maimonides 1920, 285)[13]

Is this assertion true? In the middle ages we find one opinion which seems to differ, namely that of Moses Ben Nahman (1194-1270) known as Nahmanides.

Nahmanides' Position on Free will

Nahmanides explains his position in his commentary on Genesis. The verse says that God set up the cherubim to block the way to the tree of life lest Adam try to eat from it. On this Nahmanides says:

> The Holy One blessed Be He wanted that Adam die as was decreed, however, if he should eat from the tree of life which grants eternal life – this decree would not be fulfilled… Therefore, **now that he received free will**, he was not allowed to go near this

[13] It is of interest that Abner of Burgos (1270-1347) a Jewish philosopher who converted to Christianity also known as Alfonso of Valladolid, held the opinion that human free will is a mere illusion since God knows all in advance. Avner claimed that since outside influences as family, society and necessity act on every person, de facto any given person has limited choices. So according to Abner, man feels that he chooses but in the end God has determined the outcome. (Sadik 2016, 95-112).

> tree, for at first Adam did whatever he was commanded, and did not eat from it since he did not have to. (Nahmanides 1962, 3/22)

This position seems to imply that Adam was created devoid of free-will which he received only upon consuming the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Therefore, after the sin, God blocked him from eating from the tree of life, a tree which could extend human life, since his punishment was that the day he eats from it he will surely die (Gen. 2, 17). Nahmanides reiterates this position saying:

> Adam was created at first to do what he was supposed to do, just as the heavens and the earth which are devoid of love or hatred. The tree of knowledge of good and evil instills the desire that one who eats from it can choose something or its opposite, for good or for evil. …therefore after eating from that tree, he could choose to be good or evil. (Nahmanides 1962, Genesis 2, 9)

This appears to be Nahmanides opinion that in the future free-will will be taken away from mankind as they reach the original level before the first sin:

> It seems from scripture that since the beginning of creation Man was instilled with free choice to be righteous or wicked … in order to gain merit by a good deed and to be punished for a transgression. But in messianic times the choosing of good will be second nature and no desire towards sin will be in their hearts. …and the world will return to what it was originally before the sin, in which Adam did the right thing by nature and had no desire to do wrong. (Nahmanides 1962. *Commentary to Deuteronomy*. 30, 6)

This position of Nahmanides, which seems to claim that Adam was devoid of free will until the first sin was opposed by Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508) the famous philosopher and Bible commentator from Spain who served in the courts of the kings of Portugal and Spain. Abarbanel is shocked that Nahmanides could entertain such an idea that free will be the default rather than the optimal position of Mankind.

> All the goodness and perfection of Mankind is achieved through free will and the ability to choose good over evil, without which Man would not have been created and not commanded by God… for commandments are for those who have free choice. (Abarbanel 1964, 93)

> However, despite Abarbanel's opposition it's not clear that Nahmanides actually meant that Adam and Eve were created devoid of free choice. After all in the previous quote from his commentary on Deuteronomy, he claims that from the beginning Adam was instilled with free will. Therefore, his position might have been that what happened by eating from the tree of knowledge was the fall into the desire for evil. However the knowledge of evil was known to him even beforehand. An alternative explanation was offered by N. Guttel. Guttel posits that there are levels of choices and moral dilemmas and one man's dilemma is non-existent for another. For example, one man may struggle with the question of whether to steal or not but another man, more morally developed may not have any dilemma with that but with the question of whether to get angry at a friend. So for the more morally refined man the first dilemma did not exist and it was as if he had no choice since the outcome for him was obvious. Therefore Adam before the sin was on a high level in which most moral dilemmas had obvious outcomes before the decision was taken. (Guttel 2002, 124-125).

Despite Maimonides' claim of the centrality of human free will in Jewish faith, there is a tendency among religionists to act in almost a fatalistic manner in many scenarios of life claiming that God had proclaimed the outcome of the situation in advance. I have witnessed this type of attitude in relation to automobile accidents. Sometimes there are those who forget that it was a human being at the wheel and not just God who decreed the outcome. About this Solomon said (proverbs 19:3): "The foolishness of man distorts his way but in his heart he blames God [instead]." Therefore one can understand the importance of teaching the Maimonidean view on free will from the point of view of moral responsibility. However, the question still remains: why does popular

religion tend to be so fatalistic if human free will is so central to the idea of Judaism? To understand this we must enter the next arena if our discussion; the idea of Divine fore-knowledge and human free will.

Divine Pre-Knowledge and Human Free Will

The theologians of the Kalam, an early Islamic school that developed in the eighth century, as well as the early church fathers, came to the logical conclusion that if God knows the future, i.e., events before they take place, then there cannot be human free will. In other words, if God knows that Robert will be saintly, then Robert will have to be saintly. If you say that there is still the possibility that Robert will not be saintly that means that God did not know this in absolute terms. If God knows for certain what the future holds, there is no room for human free will. Now since the prophets appear to receive knowledge of the future from God, and since Isaiah (41; 4) also says that God knows the future, we are left with the realization that human free will cannot really exist from a biblical point of view. However, if we say that human free will is an illusion, then why does the bible tell us to do good and keep away from evil and promise reward and punishment? This is a seeming biblical paradox and was a major theological problem in the early Middle Ages among religionists. Early Christian thinkers, such as St. Anselm, used this logical paradox to prove that God predestines human action. The Kalam, who believed the same, needed to explain how the Koran can require human actions if there is no free will. After all, what is the point of the five major commandments of Islam if free will is an illusion? The Kalam developed an idea called the "principle of acquiring." The idea was that the righteous man, even though predestined by God, could not reach eternal reward without actually doing the good deed. Therefore, by doing the good deed, even if pre-destined, it becomes ours. This doesn't give us free will, but is an attempt to solve the paradox even if in a limited way. By the twelfth century, Persian Islamic thinkers such as Avicenna had developed new ways of solving the problem. At this point it is appropriate to say that from a Jewish point of view the problem had to be reconciled in some way, for the Mishnah in

the Ethics of the Fathers states that: "All is known [by God] but [human] free choice is still given." (Avot 3; 19) This paradox was an attempt to hold both ends of the cord. Maimonides, influenced by Avicenna, tried to reconcile this and wrote:

> If you should say: Doesn't the Holy One Blessed Be He know all events before they happen and therefore knows whether one will be wicked or saintly? If He knows that one will be saintly it cannot be otherwise and if you shall say that He knows he will be saintly but he can still be wicked, that means He did not know this absolutely. Know that the answer to this question is lengthy and broad and many great and lofty principles are connected to it. But you must understand this which I say: We have already explained in the second chapter of Yesodei Torah, that God does not know through a knowledge that is separate from him as humans do, for they and their knowledge are two things. God and his knowledge are one and no man can understand this fully. For just as man cannot grasp God's essence as it says: for a man cannot see me and live, so too he has not the ability to understand God's knowledge. This is what the prophet says: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways not your ways.' Therefore we cannot understand how God can know all the creatures and their actions [in advanced knowledge], but we do know for certain that one's actions are their own and not forced by God. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Penitence, 5; 5)

How does Maimonides reconcile free will and Divine pre-knowledge? He adopts Avicenna's idea, as follows: When we say that Divine pre-knowledge contradicts human free-will this is since we equate Divine knowledge with human knowledge. We assume that God knows the future as we know the present and the past. Now since human beings know only events that have already happened, we then assume that God's knowledge of the future must be of events that have to happen. But what if God's knowledge is totally different from our knowledge? Then we could not make any comparison and the assumption could be wrong. To prove that God's knowledge is different

than human knowledge Maimonides gives an example. With human beings we can differentiate between themselves and what they know. In fact, as Maimonides states in chapter 8 of the eight chapters, with Humans we talk of the knower (us), the known (the idea we discovered) and knowledge (our intelligence). We cannot speak of God and His knowledge as two things. For one could ask if God had this knowledge previously. If not, then he was missing this knowledge and was not perfect and if we are to say that he always had this knowledge since time eternal we have just argued that there are two separate eternal beings, God and this knowledge of his; which would be impossible. Therefore we must say that God and his knowledge are one. Maimonides states in the *Guide* that God is the Knower, the knowledge and the known, for He is one. Having said this, Maimonides sees this as a demonstration that God's knowledge by definition must be essentially different than ours.[14] This being the case, we now see that Avicenna's argument that God's knowledge and our knowledge must be different is a sound argument. Therefore we do not know in which way God knows the future. We only know the two logical imperatives: that God knows the future and that we have free will.

This does not explain how God knows the future, of course, but just that it must be in a very different way from how we perceive the past and present.

This is certainly still hard to understand. I sometimes like to explain this through the example of sight. I see what is in the room but I did not cause it to be there. Somehow, God can see the future without having caused the actual event to happen. To our minds this is incomprehensible since we do not perceive things in the same way. This position is the dominant view in Jewish philosophy and seems to be the simple meaning of the mishnaic saying: "All is known but Free will is given." However, as in every issue, there is a dissident view; that of Levi Ben Gershon, referred to as Gersonides.

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[14] Maimonides brings five aspects in which God's knowledge is different than human knowledge. See *Guide* III; 20 (S. Pines ed. pp. 482-484).

The Dissident View

Judaism has always been quite tolerant to the plethora of ideas, even some unorthodox ones, but less so to unorthodox actions. A good example of this tolerance would be Gersonides' book *Wars of the Lord* which his critics called the 'Wars Against the Lord.' Despite this, they not only tolerated him but held him in good repute. Gersonides takes Maimonides to task on the issue of God's pre-knowledge. Since we cannot logically assume that there can be human free will and Divine pre-knowledge without assuming Divine predestination, we must assume that God does not know the future. Differing from Maimonides and Avicenna, Gersonides takes the view of Averroes:

> That the knowledge of God, may He be blessed, is not different from our knowledge in the way that the Master [Maimonides], may his memory be blessed, maintained. This is because it is clear that we derive matters that we affirm of God, may He be blessed, from matters that are (affirmed) of us. I mean to say that we affirm of God, may He be blessed, that He has knowledge because of the knowledge found in us… Now it is self evident concerning any predicate when it is affirmed of a certain thing on the basis of its existence in another thing this it is not said of both things in absolute nominal equivation. That is because between things which are absolutely equivocal there is no analogy. (Gersonides 1977, 188-190)

In other words, if we did not have intellect, we would not know that God should have intellect. Therefore, this intellect must resemble ours in some way. Therefore we must say that God's intellect is like ours, just greater.

> Therefore, it is clear that there is no difference between the knowledge of God, may He be blessed, and our knowledge except that the knowledge of God, may He be blessed, is immeasurably more perfect and this kind of knowledge is truer in level and clarity. (Gersonides 1977, 191)

Now, since God's knowledge is like ours' but just greater, and since human free will is a sin qua non from biblical literature, it would be illogical to state that God knows the future. However, this is not an imperfection in God since the future does not exist.[15]

This is all fine and dandy, but how does Gersonides explain prophecy, which is God's sharing his knowledge of the future with the prophet? Gersonides' answer is that God shows the prophet both the future and its contingent possibilities.

> Scripture says, 'Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His servants the prophets' [Amos 3:7] But it does not follow necessarily from their testifying to a certain evil that it will be actualized. As [Joel] said, peace be unto him, 'For the Lord is gracious…and repents evil' [Joel 2:13] (Gersonides 1977, 293)

In other words, the prophet is shown that evil could befall the people but if they repent it will not happen. In the same way, prophecy for the good can change if the people go on the path of evil. Therefore God is showing the prophet the possibilities that the future holds. To understand this better, we need to remember that Gersonides is a believer in astrology.[16] Gersonides states that God does not know the future in exact detail, however since He created the world, and since He knows exactly how the world works according to the various constellations and times, He knows exactly what choices will be available in any given future date. In fact, since He knows human nature as well, He also can guess with a 99% probability as to how each human being will choose in these given circumstances. This is what he reveals to the prophets. This can be compared to a statistician who can say that next Labor Day weekend, based on past statistics, 400 people will die in road accidents in the US. However he will not know who. God has

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[15] See for instance: Feldman 1982, 5. Sara Klein-Braslavy explains that according to Gersonides God knows the future from the start but this is knowledge of the general things and not particulars. He knows that Man can make change though an intellectual choice but is not certain if he will. (Gersonides 1977).

[16] All the pre-Copernican Jewish rationalists, except for Maimonides, saw astrology as a science and not just a belief system.

99.99% probability knowledge of the future with only the slightest margin of error produced by human free will.[17] This differs immensely from Maimonides, who claims that God has perfect knowledge of the future. Maimonides also states that if God shows the prophet the future, it has to happen. Only in the event of an evil decree can repentance change the outcome, but a positive prophecy has to come about if it is true.[18]

God's Knowledge of the Present *versus* Human Knowledge

At this point we can now ponder how God perceives the present. Is it as we do, or can He see things in the present that we do not? To state it in different terms: if human reason is universal, does that mean that the way we understand a rational concept is the same way that God does? For instance, if one and one is two and I state that I know that for certain, does that mean that for God one and one can only be two as well, or is it possible that God might one day point out that one and one can come out to something else other than two in another scenario? Maimonides as a rationalist who believes in the universality of human reason would argue that God knows things that I do not. However, in the limited realm of human understanding, what we know as absolute truths even God would perceive in an identical way. If I don't say this, I am basically claiming that all logic is subjective, which in an absolute sense would render it untrue. Rambam as a rationalist assures us that this cannot be. "We cannot ascribe to God the power of doing what is

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[17] Isaac Bar Sheshet Perfet (the Rivash, 1326-1408) criticizes Gersonides on this point saying, if God does not know beforehand what a person will do but only after it is done, this means that God acquires knowledge of something He did not know before which would show change in God as well as imperfection. The Rivash tries to give his own explanation that God both knows what the person will choose as well as why he chose what he did without forcing it (Responsa no. 118).

[18] Hasdai Crescas dealt with this issue differently (*Or Hashem*, Jerusalem 1990, IV, 5), with an unconventional description of human free will. Despite the fact that Crescas argued against Gersonides' determinism he himself had a sort of a deterministic view. Crescas believed that God knows the future and therefore this theoretically should not allow human free choice, however this Divine determination does not rule out contingencies, which allow human choice. (Feldman, 1982, 6).

impossible,"[19] and therefore what we perceive as true in this world is universally true. On this point Maimonides agrees with Aristotle. However, he makes one exception. God can create the universe *ex nihilo*, which seems to be impossible from the point of view of human reason.[20] This creating of something from nothing is a miracle which God performs even though it is not understood by human reason how this can be possible. However, one can ask: if God cannot do things generally impossible to fathom, how can He perform miracles? Is that why Maimonides claims that all miracles were created in advance by God in the moment before the end of the sixth day of creation just before nightfall?[21] Is it an attempt to give a rule to that which breaks the rules of nature? Is the miraculous an anomaly of nature that God created to be part of nature, therefore giving it a sort of logical status?[22] Joseph Albo tried to answer this problem by differentiating between things logically and innately impossible which cannot change, and things that are impossible due to the laws of nature and therefore are subject to a miracle. (Albo, 1960, part one, chapter 22). God can break the rules of nature, since he set them. This is what we call a miracle. However, God cannot do something which we understand as logically impossible.[23]

God's Knowledge of the Present – A Kabbalistic Approach

The Rashba [R. Shlomo Ben Abraham Aderet 1235-1310] was one of the first to argue with Rambam on the scope of Divine knowledge. In a famous letter concerning the negative influence of philosophic Judaism

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[19] *Guide* III: 15, Solomon Pines ed., pp. 459 – 461. See also Aristotle, *Physics VI*, 10, 241b, 4-8.

[20] Wolfson points out that Maimonides differs with the philosophers also on the question of whether God can know the future. Possibly Maimonides did not see this as something notable since it does not include a physical interaction with our world or a change in the range of perceived logic but just an argument for an additional ability in God's knowledge. (Wolfson 1979, 199).

[21] Commentary to the Mishnah of Avot, 5; 6.

[22] Reines reached a different conclusion based on Strauss' concept of exoteric and esoteric Rambam (Reines 1974, 260-262).

[23] Al-Farabi has a similar notion which he refers to as the exclusion of the middle. A thing cannot both exist and not-exist simultaneously. This would apply to God as well.

on the masses, Rashba addressed what he perceived to be the major causes of confusion in Jewish thought. One of them was this issue of God's ability to enact the impossible.

> What we were told and taught, to allow [the idea] that some of the [logical] impossibilities have a stable nature [even for God], specifically among those certain ideas that are needed for Torah [faith] for they are the root and base that all the rest depend upon. They are for example: that God make another God like Himself or that He incarnate Himself or cause any change in Himself for we do not believe that the blessed God can be described as capable of such a thing as the great Rabbi [Maimonides], of blessed memory, wrote. Enumerated among these impossibilities are other necessary ideas [of faith] making it impossible to explain it all in writing. (Teshuvot HaRashba 1997, vol. 1: 216).

As mentioned above, Rambam limits God's ability to perform the logically impossible to one instance, creation ex nihilo (*Guide* III: 1, 460), whereas Rashba enumerates what impossibilities God cannot do, and gives a rule of thumb, i.e., those items necessary for our belief; suggesting that all other humanly logical impossibilities are possible for Him. The exceptions, for Rashba, seem to revolve around the main theological tenets of Judaism those ideas concerning the being of God. Therefore, where Maimonides made an exception for creation ex nihilo and took the point of view that rational impossibilities cannot exist from God's perspective, Rashba took the opposite view, making the exceptions all the theological issues relating directly to God's being. Obviously we can ask why according to Rashba, there should be exceptions. Apart from what I stated above, this is too involved a question to delve into here. I would rather like to focus on these two positions and their implications. The Rashba's stance is that logical impossibilities are a human condition. There are certain things that we will call impossible for God for reasons of belief, but in general, there is no reason to limit God by human boundaries. If we extend this idea to the realm of logic, then this discussion has implications for the understanding of human logic. For, if God can perceive our world differently, how can we know if logic is really universal outside our own perception? This type of

thinking is every rationalist's nightmare. However, it is also a very different perception of God vis a vis creation than that of the rationalist. By way of illustration; I remember in my late teens taking a bus from Kiriat Malakhi to Ashkelon in Israel. Two teens approached and asked me if I believed in God. Upon hearing an affirmative answer they proceeded by asking me if I believed that God was all-powerful. They then asked me if this God could create a stone which He could not lift. Being a devout rationalist at the time, I explained to them in accordance with the *Guide* III:15, that logical limitations do not take away from God's perfection. Therefore, by answering in the negative to their question concerning such a stone, I was merely establishing that God could pick up everything for there is nothing He cannot pick up. Therefore, I claimed, it is illogical to imagine Him creating such a stone. Today, after reading Rashba, I would offer them a second explanation (if I could find them. At the time they seemed impressed that I was willing to offer an answer). Based on the assumption that God has no logical limitations, since He cannot be defined by human logic except for those which we need for our understanding of the tenets of faith, I would say: "Can God create a stone that He cannot pick up? Yes, and He can pick it up as well." You might point out the flawed human logic here, but this is according to the opinion that logical contradictions are possibilities as far as God is concerned.[24]

To summarize, we have discussed here three issues: 1) The idea of free will versus determinism, in which we found Maimonides' view as unusually unbending in his need to present human free will as totally free. Such a position adds weight and responsibility to human moral decision making. This is a unique position since many Jewish thinkers are willing to allow exceptions in which in certain cases there may be Divine intervention, seeing human will as mostly free. We also presented the view of the Jewish astrologers who saw human free will as limited by the circumstances presented by the constellations. 2) We discussed the problem of Divine pre-knowledge and the problem of human free will and explained Maimonides' and Gersonides' position. 3) We ended our inquiry by discussing the implications for understanding Divine knowledge of the present and presented an interesting argument between Maimonides and the Rashba in this area.

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[24] I heard this example in the name of the late R. Leon-Yehudah Ashkenazi.

From a Theocentric to an Antropocentric Religious Perspective

The world in which the issues of human free will and Divine prescience were discussed was a theocentric world in which religion prescribed the limits to knowledge and in this case to human choice. Maimonides in this sense predates his time by offering an anthropocentric view of his world. He does this by explaining that it's God's will that human beings have this free choice and the responsibility for their actions:

> Do not ask: How can a person choose between good and evil, if nothing happens in this world without God's permission. Is it not written, "Whatever God desires He does, in heaven and earth." (Ps. 135:6)? In fact, everything does happen by His will, nevertheless, the will of our Creator is to give the human the choice between good and evil. Just as God wants fire and wind to rise upward, water and earth to gravitate downward, the zodiac to move in a circular orbit, and the other creatures to be guided by the God given laws of nature, so too, He desired man to have free choice with the option to do as he wishes. Man, on his own initiative, and God-given intellect, was given the ability to do anything within his capacity. Therefore, man is judged according to his deeds. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Knowledge, Laws of Penitence, 5,4)

God wanted mankind to possess free will and therefore it cannot be a limitation of God's ability and power since this was His wish. This is not just an answer to a theological question. Maimonides is now giving a legitimate argument for an anthropocentric world where human beings are solely responsible for their own destiny. The argument between Maimonides and Rashba can be understood as being about the limitations of this new anthropocentric world vision from an absolute point of view, a limitation which Maimonides is reluctant to share.

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